

4 o' clock

by Bobbi Lurie

I still walk into galleries. A shadow of my old self still walks into galleries. That old self was hungry to be wounded by the juxtaposition of color and form and texture and line and darkness and light. But I can no longer see art. I can no longer see that thing which is called art by those who say they know what art is. Whereas once the texture of paint, the curve of line, the density of color was the meaning I gave to my life, I now see it all as an interruption of blank space, a contrivance of personality, an obscuration of peace. All the experimentation, the nuances of meaning, all the hidden gestures and clever ideas are lost on me. Cleverness is lost on me. Cleverness has squeezed me dry.

There were circumscribed ways of behavior, avenues to success. We shared information. Partially. We gave and we took without trust. We were competing for a place on the narrow stage. We felt we were always being watched and judged, accepted or rejected. The things of our heart were examined and grasped or ignored and thrown away. Getting into a gallery, having a show, earning praise and recognition was what we lived for. We held our places, standing on tiptoe, about to fall any minute. Hanging on was an art in itself. Could this be happiness? We never asked for happiness. We longed only for greatness.

Signs of greatness included careless scratches on napkins and envelopes, framed in fine mahogany, placed delicately and purposefully with rabbit skin glue on rag board to preserve the moment's past freshness, its precarious durability, its disdain for completion or communication. Framing paper scraps and envelopes were once acts committed posthumously by others but we did it on

our own now, before we were dead. Who could trust the judgement of others?

Symbols of fame were what mattered. There was no time to wait. We were anxious to preserve the gesture, the stance, the desire, to declare ourselves great in case nobody else would. That was the emblem of art, the look of art. We learned always to exude the feeling of significant gestures, to thrust out a smoke screen against understanding and judgement and obscurity.

We learned to dress the part. To dress in black. To be pale. To never look at the sun. Nature was our enemy. It seemed to have no purpose or direction. It misunderstood our greatness, our need for immortality and separateness. We learned to fight against nature, to fight against time. We learned to strive for immortality through a blip in Art News or Art Forum. We learned to strive to be loved by people we hated. To be accepted by the unacceptable and fleeting standards of culture. We learned to survive intact in a world full of expression but empty of love.

One day, one month, one year I grew weary of it all. Every hour was four o'clock. My work reflected a place too deep, too shallow, too painful to bear. There was too much of it. Years had been spent balancing on the narrow stage, accumulating gestures in a language of silence. There was no more room in my apartment for anything but art. I was ill from the fumes and the hunger and the loneliness. I could not see any more. I did not want to see anymore. I wanted to see nothing, to be no one. I wanted the freedom of blank walls.

I went through all of my work. Days and days of visceral memories confronting me as I looked through the years of paintings and etchings and drawings. Every image that hurt me, that fell short, I put into a box or a crate which I wrapped securely and tied with tape and string. They were holy. They were caskets. I wanted my work to die the death of the body. I wanted it to disintegrate into the earth, losing its memory, mutely evaporating.

I lugged all the crates and boxes downstairs for the garbage men to take away. I envied the garbage men their freedom to feel the

wind in their hair as they drove through each neighborhood, discarding and crushing all that was not needed. I envied them their job of removing unwanted things from the earth. They gave the earth space for something new to emerge. After fifteen trips up and down the stairs I went back to my apartment and slept for hours, emptying my mind in a dreamless sleep, blank and colorless.

